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GENDER AND EDUCATION, 2016
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2016.1167176

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Feminist tales of teaching and resistance: reimagining gender in early childhood education (Reggio Emilia, Italy)

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates whether the memories of women's movements that grew out of the Italian Resistance to the Nazi-Fascist Regime during the Second World War have left any legacy to women teachers in early childhood education. The article focuses on the case of internationally renowned and high-quality schools for young children, the municipal schools of a northern Italian town called Reggio Emilia. In contrast to much of the literature on gender and early childhood education, this paper reveals that many women teachers in these schools think of themselves as agents of social change, and that this is tied to their memories of the Italian Resistance.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 29 May 2015
Revised 14 March 2016
Accepted 14 March 2016

KEYWORDS
History; sociology; narratives; qualitative interviews

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Coll:
QA:
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Introduction

> Many times, during the winter nights, instead of telling us tales, both my dad and my mum would tell us the episode of the cooperative, and they would recall when the Fascists, from the campanile in the town of Sant' Ilario, would try to shoot towards the rooftops of the cooperative because some anti-Fascists were hiding there and when they entered our home, they looked everywhere and destroyed everything, humiliating my mother who still was a young woman. (Author's translation, Greci in Pellegrino, Spaggiari, and Spagni 2004, 42).[1]

For many Italians, especially for the older generations, stories of the Italian Resistance against the Nazi-Fascist Regime during the Second World War are part of their historical and cultural heritage (Focardi 2005). Resistance to the Nazi-Fascist Regime was especially strong in Emilia Romagna (Focardi 2005; Gagliani 2006; Ginsborg 2003), which also produced iconic images of women internationally renowned for their strength and courage (Colombelli 2005; Passerini 1988; Pellegrino et al. 2004). Tales of women's participation in the Resistance often resonate within narratives pertaining to the liberation of Italy from the Nazi-Fascist Regime (Passerini 1988; Vecchio 2010).

Some historians of education have argued that there is an important connection between women teachers' professional identity and their memories of past educational experiences (see for example Hoskins and Smedley 2015). Others have shown that memories of feminist movements have empowered women teachers, reinforcing their sense of selfhood (see Dillabough in Arnot and Dillabough 2000). Much less research has been conducted into the connection between temporality and women's work specifically in early

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childhood education. This article seeks to address this lacuna asking whether memories of women's roles in the Italian Resistance have left a legacy among women teachers in Italian schools since the end of the Second World War.

My study focuses on the case of the internationally renowned system of municipal schools for early childhood education in Reggio Emilia, a town of the northern Italian region of Emilia Romagna where the participation of women in the Italian Resistance had been particularly strong (Hall, Horgan, Ridgway, Murphy et al. 2010; Project Zero and Reggio Children 2001). I argue that memories of women's role in the Italian Resistance have left a strong legacy among Reggio Emilia women teachers to the present day, which empowers them to continue to engage in the political work of teaching. I also argue that the image of the woman teacher represented in these schools resists, at least in part, a traditional gender discourse around early childhood teaching and motherhood (Arnot and Dillabough 2000; Davies 2003; Langford 2007; Walkerdine and Lucey 1989).

Historical context and schooling in Reggio Emilia, Italy

The legacy left to women teachers in Reggio Emilia by women active in the Resistance can be more fully understood in light of the historical significance of that Resistance, and its importance in Italian history. A brief outline of the historical context within which the Reggio Emilia schools developed, with an emphasis on gender politics, follows.

The history of the Reggio Emilia municipal schools can be traced back to the Second World War and to the Italian Resistance movement (Balfour 2015; Canovi, Lorenzi, and Borghi 2001; Cavallini 2010; Edwards, Gandini, and Forman 1993). Under the leadership of Mussolini in 1940, Italy joined the Second World War alongside the Axis powers. In September 1943, General D. Eisenhower arrived in Salerno and Prime Minister Pietro Badoglio defied Mussolini by signing an armistice with the Allies. Italy was thus divided. To the south of Naples, there were the Allies, the King Vittorio Emanuele, and Badoglio. In the North were their enemies, the Germans who established the Social Republic of Salò – a satellite puppet state of Nazi-Germany.

The Italian Resistance movement formed in 1943. It comprised both an armed movement of groups known as the partisans and an unarmed civil resistance, which provided support to the partisans fighting for the liberation of Italy. Alongside the Allied forces, the Italian Resistance played a key role in the liberation of Italy in 1945. The active participation of women, both in the armed and in the civil Resistance, was central to this movement. The majority of the women that participated in the Resistance belonged to the Group of Women's Defence (GDD). The GDD reported to the National Liberation Committee, the principal directive body of the Italian Resistance movement. We know of 1268 women from Reggio Emilia who partook in the Resistance, of which 646 fought in the armed Resistance (Appari 1993).

Organised women's movements proliferated in post-war Italy, led primarily by former members of the Resistance. This included the Italian Women's Union (UDI), the largest women's organisation that Italy has ever known. The UDI fought for the foundation and growth of schools for young children. It managed over 40 schools in Reggio Emilia after the war.[2] With the significant contribution of the UDI, the local municipal government opened the first preschool in 1963, and the first municipal infant-toddler centre in 1971.[3]

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The Reggio Emilia municipal schools are publicly funded co-educational institutions for young children from zero to six years old. Today, Reggio Emilia pedagogical practices are internationally noted for their progressiveness, and the so-called 'Reggio Emilia Approach' inspires schools in more than 30 countries worldwide. Many educational theorists have studied the progressive character of the educational practices in Reggio Emilia (Edwards 2002, 2003; Firlik 1996; Hall, Horgan, Ridgway, and Cunningham 2010; Paolella 2013; Planillo 2004; Zero and Children 2001). Some have even described them as 'utopian' (see Moss 2014). AQ2

The exceptional character of these schools in Reggio Emilia can be attributed to a unique child-led approach. A child-led approach does not impose on children a predefined curriculum, but allows them to be active protagonists in their own learning (Langford 2010). However in contrast with most child-led practices that focus on individualised development of children (Burman 2007; Cannella 1997; Langford 2007; Walkerdine and Lucey 1989), in Reggio Emilia concern centres on the role that social interactions play in shaping the educational develeopment of young children. Children are often encouraged to work in small groups, and classes are co-led at any time by two teachers who undergo constant professional development.

A final point here is that although some research has been conducted on the gendered aspects of children's education in the municipal schools of Reggio Emilia (see Browne 2004; Edwards et al. 1993; Zero and Children 2001), no study so far has examined the experience of women teachers in these schools. As stated in the Introduction, it is the exploration of women's work in the Reggio Emilia municipal schools, and its historical link to the memories of women's role in the Italian Resistance movement, which constitutes the focus of this article.

A feminist hermeneutical ethnography

The findings presented in this article are part of a nine-month qualitative ethnography of women's working lives, conducted in the Italian town of Reggio Emilia. My ethnographic research combined different methods: interviews with parents, teachers, and policy-makers; analysis of archival and school documents; focus groups; and observation in schools. In this article, I present only the findings from the oral histories that I gathered with Reggio Emilia women educators and administrators.[4]

As someone invested in critical and feminist ethnographic approaches in this research, I have sought to avoid 'notions of sacred, pitied, or objectified identities in ethnographic research' (Dillabough and Gardner in Smeyers et al. 2015, 732). My ethnographic approach, as already suggested in the previous sections, aims to capture the complex ways in which teachers' narrative accounts of their professional experiences are temporally situated in Reggio Emilia's history and culture. My research stands therefore in contrast with ethnographic practices that portray 'an abstract, a-historical other' (Clifford and Marcus 1986, 118).

Moreover, my analysis does not describe the researcher as neutral, but as culturally situated: a researcher will always conduct studies from a particular vantage point (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Fonow and Cook 1991). I am an Italian woman who has worked in a Reggio Emilia-inspired school in the past. As a teacher and a feminist, I am invested in finding ways to achieve empowerment in my own profession and as a researcher. I am therefore

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aware that these aspects of my own historical, biographical narrative might have shaped my research and its directions. This might be an obvious point, but it at least provides an important basis for understanding my interpretation of the data.

In accordance with a feminist and hermeneutical framework, my ethnography of women's work took a narrative approach that treats women teachers' narrative accounts about education and history as 'discursive events' that can shape women teachers' experiences in schools (Bold 2011; Dillabough and Kennelly 2010; Tamboukou 2008, 284). Their historical insights derive from oral testimonies. These research strategies are inspired by previous analyses of narrative accounts (Dillabough and Kennelly 2010; Gardner 1984; Tamboukou 2003, 2008). My analysis has also been motivated by the work of Italian historians, especially Alessandro Portelli and Luisa Passerini (Passerini 1988, 2002; Portelli 1990, 1997; see also Cavarero 2006).

The selection of the interviewees followed a snowball sampling strategy, and mostly focused on one infant-toddler centre and one preschool. Both schools were assigned to me by the Institution of Schools and Infant-Toddler Centres of Reggio Emilia (*Istituzione delle Scuole e dei Nidi d'Infanzia di Reggio Emilia*), which manages the municipal school system. I have also interviewed current and former teachers from five other schools. The conversations, which engaged with the theme of this article amounted to 24 total interviews with current and former Reggio women teachers, administrators who had been previously teachers, and local assessors who played an important role in the foundation and the development of these schools.[5]

Prior to their interviews, I told the interviewees that I was interested in examining women's roles in the development of these schools. I also explained to the participants that my perspective was driven by a concern with understanding the ways that gender functioned in the schools. Semi-structured questions allowed the participants to determine the direction of the dialogue according to their own interests. For example, questions included, 'how would you describe your role in the municipal schools in Reggio Emilia?', 'how do you compare your role with that of other teachers in Italian schools?', 'what is the history of these schools?', and 'I see that in these schools you commemorate history through different activities – Why?' The interviews were conducted in Italian, and were transcribed and translated by the author. In my translations, I have attempted to stay as close as possible to the semantics of the original Italian text.

Finally, my thematic analysis emerged out of my feminist and hermeneutical framework. This approach has been drawn upon in recent gender and educational studies (Dillabough in Arnot and Dillabough 2000; Dillabough and Gardner in Smeyers et al. 2015). Uniting critical theory with hermeneutics, critical hermeneutics is concerned with the ways in which culture, in the form of written texts or spoken narrative accounts, motivates and shapes individuals' and groups' understanding of their practices (Gardner 2011). Critical hermeneutics also highlights the temporal dimension of individuals' experiences, understanding them as shaped by their interpretations of the past (Dillabough et al. in Smeyers et al. 2015). Within this context, gender is seen as a narrative in action that can be located temporally, but is transformed within contexts and leads to particular beliefs. As will become evident in the section that follows, feminist interventions into early childhood education play a substantial role in shaping women teachers' political and ideological beliefs about work.

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Women teachers as professionals

The sense of empowerment and professional pride of women teachers in Reggio Emilia reflects the influence of women's history on early childhood teaching in the schools. In this section, I first consider the traditional discourses that are in circulation around early childhood teaching in the Reggio Emilia schools. Then I show that in these schools, early childhood teachers describe their role as that of powerful professionals who are not solely linked to mothering as a normative discourse of post-war women's teaching practice. Women in these roles argue that teaching in Reggio Emilia empowered them as women. Their self-images contrast with those of more traditional feminine roles in early childhood teaching (Dillabough 2009; Langford 2007; Walkerdine et al. 1989). Following on from these findings, in the next section I seek to shed light on the connection between the women's history of these schools as it relates to the Italian Resistance, and the empowered sense of selfhood narrated by the women teachers.

In early childhood education, the teacher, often a woman, tends to be described in gendered terms as a 'care worker': a kind of surrogate mother, a benevolent servant, or a social parent, be it a 'mother or a "housewife"' (Acker and Dillabough 2007; Arnot and Dillabough 2000; Langford 2007; Mallozzi and Galman 2014; Moss 2007, 34). This traditionally gendered image of the teacher assumes that very little training 'is needed to undertake the work, which is understood as requiring qualities and competencies that are either innate to women ('maternal instinct') or else are acquired through the gendered division of labour within the domestic sphere ('housework skills')' (Moss 2007, 34). This role of the teacher as a care worker has typically been based on a distinction between the private sphere of the home, the public/political sphere, 'and the association of particular gender relations with each sphere' (Dillabough in Arnot and Dillabough 2000, 161). This also means that women have been constructed 'as non-citizens in schools because of their affiliation with the private sphere' (Dillabough in Arnot and Dillabough 2000, 161).

The narrative accounts offered by the participants of this study present an image of the woman teacher in the Reggio Emilia municipal schools that is notably different in character. That difference emerges clearly from testimonies offered by the teachers themselves. One image – provided by some of the Reggio Emilia teachers – contrasts powerfully with the image of the 'domestic housewife' woman teacher and care worker. For example, Pia argues that as a worker in the Reggio Emilia schools, she never felt like a surrogate mother but instead like a professional figure:

> I never felt like the mother of the children, but an educational figure. I began to understand this very early on. I was able to notice the difference between teachers in traditional preschools that have this role of the second mother. By contrast, in these schools, I feel that I have moved away from this conception of the teacher as a second mother, to become a legitimate professional. (Pia, current preschool teacher, age: 40s)

Similarly, Giorgia remarks that in these schools the teachers have the role of educational figures with 'powerful knowledge'. This image contrasts, she argues, with the role of surrogate mothers, or benevolent philanthropists, traditionally attributed to women teachers in early childhood education. In this respect, Giorgia says:

> Here you are a professional worker […]; in other schools by contrast, teachers are more like nannies. Everywhere else they are nannies. (Giorgia, current preschool teacher, age: 40s)

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This sense of empowerment amongst women teachers extends beyond the preschools to educators in the Reggio Emilia municipal infant-toddler centres. I conducted a focus group in one of the municipal Reggio Emilia infant-toddler centres with five women teachers from different generations.[6] When prompted about how they thought of their role as teachers in relation to that of teachers in other schools, they said:

Anna: Our role is not only that of a pastoral figure.
Benedetta: We are not second mothers to children, and parents, I think, understand that too.
Francesca: No, absolutely not, we might have it sometimes, but in general our image is that of educating figures!

These comments suggest that Reggio Emilia educators identify their roles as those of respected professionals. This appears to stand in sharp contrast to more traditional views of early childhood teachers as caretakers, or as mothering figures, whose role is merely an extension of those of women in the private and domestic realm.

Another important characteristic arising from the interview data with the women teachers in these schools is the recognition that this professional status has played an important part in shaping Reggio Emilia women teachers' sense of empowerment and professionalism *qua* women. For example, Gisella, a former woman teacher who worked in an infant-toddler centre explains that her role as a Reggio Emilia educator encouraged her to get involved in the public and political life of the city, breaking traditional gender norms that confined women to more domestic activities. This is because, she argues, Reggio Emilia schools require the constant participation of teachers in meetings with parents and local citizens. Specifically, Gisella argues:

> We worked a lot, a great deal. There was a lot of participation in the life of the city. We went to all these meetings. My husband used to tell me: 'But to have a preschool, you need to go to all these meetings?' It was a job that really excited us. We felt part of a collective project. It was also a job that played a role in the construction of our own identity. To go out at night, to attend the meetings about the schools, with my bike or walking, these were all things that women would not do back then. (Gisella, former teacher in an infant-toddler centre, age: 70s)

A current preschool teacher, Dora also informed me that her job has reinforced her sense of self as a professional and as a woman. Just like Gisella, Dora links her feeling of empowerment as a teacher to a sense of belonging to a collective and political project. In this way, her role appears to sharply contrast with a more traditional image of women as non-citizens, bearing the responsibility of the education of the future generations. Dora says:

> This work really helped me to overcome my insecurities. Really, as a woman this job has helped me a lot. (Dora, current infant-toddler centre teacher, age: 60s)

A similar sense of empowerment is noticeable also among the women teachers in the infant-toddler centre where I conducted the focus group mentioned previously. Here too, the women educators link their understanding of their role as professional and educating figures to a sense of empowerment:

Benedetta: Our role empowers us, it gives us value.
Sonia: Yeah, this is an algorithm that works for us.

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Taken together, therefore, these narratives suggest that across generations, the teachers in Reggio Emilia schools often reject the symbolically weighty image of the teacher as mother. Instead, they represent the teacher as an 'active citizen worker'. Moreover, this imagined and narrated sense of professionalism serves an empowering function, which heightens women's sense of belonging to a collective and political project. These are only a small sample of the stories told by the women I encountered. But there are many other such accounts that evoke an image of women as active citizens in their community, rather than merely conduits for raising the future children of the nation. It is also important to highlight, however, that some of the teachers are concerned with other factors influencing their teaching profession (e.g. recent budget cuts). Although these other factors might have an impact on their professional experiences, the discourse surrounding early childhood teaching in Reggio Emilia is still different from a traditional and gendered narrative of teaching as caretaking.

Post-war narratives of gender and education

In the previous section, I showed that the relations between gender and professionalism in the municipal schools of Reggio Emilia differed from those traditionally attributed to early childhood education. These findings prompt another question: have women's memories of the Italian Resistance left a mark on notions of professionalism in the Reggio Emilia schools? In this section, I show that memories of the wartime Resistance, of women's role in it, and an understanding of the Resistance as the beginning moment of a new political awareness for Italian women, are in operation in the Reggio Emilia schools today. I then argue that there is a link between these memories of the wartime Resistance and women teachers' notions of professionalism in these schools in Reggio Emilia. I therefore demonstrate that the teachers in these schools have been inspired by their memories of the wartime Resistance and women's role in it to challenge traditional and benevolent notions of women's work.

Italian feminism was late to rise in Italy. There had been important feminist voices across Europe before the twentieth century (Malagreca 2013), and several states experienced women's emancipation movements at the turn of the century (Cobble 2015, 1; Fawcett 2002). Some early women's movements developed in Italy too, but the rise of Fascism dissipated a large part of these (Cobble 2015). The political culture of Fascism promoted a traditional image of womanhood. Fascism excluded women from the political life of the nation, and it reinforced a notion of women as benevolent philanthropists responsible for the education of the future generations of (male) citizens (Cobble 2015; De Grazia 1993). Under Fascism, any 'venture by women outside of the prescribed role of wife and mother was portrayed as threatening the very foundation of society' (Hellman 1987, 32).

As a direct response to the Fascist oppression, the anti-fascist struggle of the Italian Resistance 'became, by implication, a struggle for the restoration and expansion of women's rights' (Hellman 1987, 32). Moreover, this spirit of the Italian Resistance constituted the cultural basis of many post-war women's movements, including the UDI. As Appari states, the Italian Resistance movement was the 'matrix from which [the U.D.I.] was born and from which the first women who led the U.D.I. came' (my translation, 1993, 85).

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My findings show that the memories of the Italian Resistance movement and women's role in it are still present among current and former teachers in the municipal schools in Reggio Emilia. Many of these narratives also represent the Italian Resistance as the beginning moment of a new political awareness for Italian women. For example, Lorenza recollects her family memories in relation to the Italian Resistance and to the organised women's movements after the war:

> I believe that there is an important relationship that these schools have with the Italian Resistance. For us, women have been partisans. I remember that my mum, I was born after the end of the war, but my mother with my sister who was very little at the time, she was a 'staffetta' [woman partisan]: she would put my sister on the rack at the front of her bike where there were messages that she would take to the partisans. (Lorenza, former municipal Assessor, age: 80s)

Another particularly clear example of this is constituted by an extract from an interview that I conducted with Enrichetta, a Senior Director in the Reggio Emilia schools, who relates her own family memories of the Resistance to the new awareness of women's rights in post-war Italy:

> Narratives were very important: the other interviewees might have also told you that in our lands, Fascism has been really repressive. It was characterized by episodes of violence, like the fires seen in the cooperatives and the houses; there were also the killings in the popular housing on the first of May because the Fascists knew that we would celebrate it and so they would come shooting at people. If they knew that someone was an anti-Fascist, they would force them to drink castor oil or they would beat him up. It really was the social context that generated a great swell of opposition to the Regime that was oppressive, humiliating of people, and violent. I grew up in this social context, of simple but utopian ideals for freedom and equality. It is this context that motivated the foundation of the schools in post-war Reggio Emilia. (Enrichetta, former administrator, age: 70s)

Similarly a current preschools teacher, Giorgia, links the fight of women for the schools in the immediate post-war context to a concern for women's emancipation, grounded in the memories of women's active and political role during the Italian Resistance. She says that women fought for these schools as part of organised movements, such as the UDI, to liberate women from a traditional gender narrative confining them to the home:

> Women wanted these schools as a fight for women's right to work. Women would also be called into question for wanting this [for wanting to go to work]. After the war, there were some really determined women that fought for these schools against cultural stereotypes. (Giorgia, current preschool teacher, age: 50s)

My interview findings, thus, reveal that across generations of women in these Reggio Emilia schools, there have been vivid memories of the war, women's role in the Resistance movement, and an interpretation of the Resistance as the beginning moment of an awareness of women's political activism in the Italian nation state. These narratives also relate to the foundational story of these schools in Reggio Emilia, where women who fought for the establishment and the development of these schools are represented as inspired by a concern for women's emancipation.

How do these memories of the Resistance and women's active role in it, however, inform notions of professionalism in these Reggio Emilia schools? In accordance with

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previous studies that show that memories of women's movements can empower women teachers (Arnot and Dillabough 2000), my findings reveal that the memories of women's role in the Italian Resistance have inspired women teachers in the Reggio Emilia schools to feel like active citizen workers. In this regard, Laura argues that the figures of women partisans have inspired powerful images of femininity among teachers in the municipal schools of Reggio Emilia:

> I believe that there is an important relationship with the Resistance that these schools have. Women were there and after the war they fought for the schools. Our region is rich in these accounts of women's role in the Resistance. (Laura, former administrator, age: 80s)

Similarly, Giulia recounts the story of the school of Villa Cella, a small town close to Reggio Emilia were the people after the war started to sell the armaments left by the fleeing Germans to build a schools. In this story, women are represented at the forefront of the foundation of the schools, as active political agents. Like the other teachers, Giulia also highlights how these models of femininity have inspired her experiences as a teacher on a daily basis:

> I am sure that they have told you that women played an important role in the foundation of the first schools after the war. In the case of Villa Cella, they got together to collect the bricks. They decided to build a school for children. They had a vision of the creation of a new society. [These have been] our models. (Giulia, current preschool teacher, age: 50s)

In their interviews moreover, many women refer to iconic figures who fought in the Italian Resistance, and explain how these inspirational figures have shaped their professional identity. For example, Enrichetta mentions a woman partisan, Laila, and describes how models of femininity, like Laila's, have shaped her understanding of womanhood in a way that challenges traditional gender roles and has motivated her own fights for the schools:

> In our context, the narratives of the Resistance are rich with feminine figures. The Resistance and women's figures in it are known. These women have been models and heroines for us. For example, this woman [she shows the picture to me] was a fighting partisan; this is Laila, this is her fighting name. She was seeing a guy at the time, but then she had to go to the mountains to escape the Fascists. At that point her boyfriend told her not to go, saying he wanted to marry a woman that stayed in the house, so she broke up with him and went up to the mountains with the partisans. These women were for us models of life and courage, women who really chose to do things that went against women's traditional status. It was a mass phenomenon of many women who understood what the Resistance meant for the future. This was the beginning of awareness for women in this region. This is the cultural context from which these schools were born. (Enrichetta, former administrator in Reggio, age: 70s)

Likewise, in the focus group in the infant-toddler centre already mentioned in the previous section, the teachers point to the connection between their professional role and their memories of specific iconic women figures in the Italian Resistance. In particular, they refer to Genoeffa Cervi. Genoeffa was the mother of seven partisans who were all caught by the Fascists and killed on 28 December 1943. They also argue that figures like that of Genoeffa have shaped the collective imaginary of women teachers in the municipal schools of Reggio Emilia, challenging traditional conceptions of femininity and early childhood teaching:

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Francesca: these schools really transmit the values of the Resistance.
Benedetta: We met Genoeffa Cervi's niece who came to talk here at the school. She was neither the typical farmer, nor the stay-at-home woman. She would take care of the family, since the children were dead.
Francesca: What we mean is that she was active and interested in being active. She was not a passive woman. I read her book 'There wasn't Time to Cry!' where she tells the story of her experience of the Resistance. The point of the book is that even when her children were dead, she could not just stop and cry. She had to keep being active. This tells you a lot.
Sonia: Yeah, our schools are really connected to our territory!

Many of the Reggio Emilia teachers, therefore, offer rich personal narratives and historical accounts related to women's active role in the Italian Resistance and in post-war Italy. As these interviews show, such accounts are linked to the foundation of the Reggio Emilia schools. They highlight the significance of women's political activity in the past and conceptions of teaching in the present. Here in Reggio Emilia, memories of women's political legitimacy during the Italian Resistance and subsequently in the early founding of these schools seem motivated by the spirit of the Resistance, and women teachers' idea of themselves as political actors and professionals. Reggio Emilia teachers appear to have been inspired in their profession by the inherited struggles of those iconic women who, starting in the Resistance, fought for women's emancipation in the Italian context. Italy is and remains a site of much debate over the role of women in society. It is for this reason that the context of Fascism and women's reactions to it provide a provocative frame for repositioning women teachers' work.

Conclusions

Whilst this paper can only provide a snapshot of the narrative accounts of the teachers in Reggio Emilia, it clearly shows that there is a deep and important connection between temporality and activism in these renowned Italian schools. History, the realm of the political and intergenerational impact has been shown to be important in better understanding women teachers' work in Reggio Emilia. This connection, it would seem, is represented in the memories of women's active role in the Italian political landscape during and after the war. This is particularly manifested in a sense of agency and professionalism that is not grounded in a benevolent form of women's work. We may conclude, thus, that the past has left an important political legacy in the present educational practices in these schools, making the women teachers in Reggio Emilia feel as though they are active agents of social change rather than vessels of reproduction of the public/private split.

In light of these findings, we might reconsider the Reggio Emilia Approach with a newly informed eye towards gender and educational theory. On the one hand, this essay shows that the internationally renowned Reggio Emilia schools are exceptional in their regard for women's work and assumptions about its nature and character. The image of the Reggio Emilia teachers appears to challenge traditionally feminine understandings of early childhood teaching. One the other hand, by uniting history with the sociology of education, we

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reveal that there is a value in theorising temporality and accounts of work in Italian education. This value resides in the possibility of enhancing women's sense of a potent political selfhood narrating their professional place in the world as well as creating positive collectives for change. This emerges most strongly in the recollection of images of powerful women figures of which women's teachers see themselves as the positive descendants.

Finally, it would seem to make sense to more actively study women's political history in the nation state and assess its link to contemporary understandings of women's work. Clearly, there are regional, national and geo-political dimensions to this understanding of work, which shift debates about notions of women's work in education. Arguably Reggio Emilia is just one of many examples that can shed further light on these localised national histories. Other European analyses on this matter would encourage stronger reflections on the history of women's work in education, particularly in terms of post-war women politics of resistance.

Notes

1. Lidia Greci was Municipal Assessor of Reggio Emilia between 1956 and 1960, and 1964 and 1966, and she was also an active member of the Italian Women's Union of Reggio Emilia.
2. In this context, preschools are for children from zero to three years old, and infant-toddler centers for children from three to six years old.
3. In Italy, education is provided by three institutional types: state schools, schools funded by other public institutions (such as the local municipalities), and privately funded schools. State schools are funded by the State. Private schools are funded through private sources. Other publicly funded schools vary from both private and state schools. They are often funded by local governmental.
4. The findings that I present in this article include two focus groups (the data collection, analysis and write-up of this aspect of the research followed that of the interviews).
5. All names in the paper are pseudonyms.
6. See Appendix for details about the different generations of teachers in the focus group.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Appendix. List of participants.

Name	Age	Teacher status	Method
Elena	60s	Current	Focus group
Francesca	60s	Current	Focus group
Sonia	50s	Current	Focus group
Anna	50s	Current	Focus group
Benedetta	40s	Current	Focus group

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